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ABSTRACT

Jacksonville, Oregon, a mining town founded in a little-known and sparsely settled part of Oregon during the early 1850s, was the focus of a study of the way in which information was distributed and processed in an emerging frontier community. News appeared to be part of the community's institutional structure and to be carried and consumed on two levels-- the institutional and the interpersonal--distinguished by the extent to which information and the networks through which it was transmitted were routinized. On the institutional level, distributors included express riders, postal agents, and official military couriers. On the interpersonal level they included individuals and groups who distributed and consumed information for private and personal reasons. Future research might be profitably directed toward articulation of a conceptual framework within which the findings of this project could be generalized to other, similar studies. Once a conceptual framework is constructed, comparative studies of other communities can be undertaken.
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THE STRUCTURE OF COMMUNICATION
IN AN EMERGING FRONTIER COMMUNITY

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In a paper considering an aspect of the growth of institutions on the American frontier, it seems appropriate to begin with a reference to Frederick Jackson Turner.

Turner, of course, is perhaps best known for the hypothesis he first suggested in "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Yet he is also notable for his early advocacy of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of history. Advice which he offered in 1908 still sounds remarkably progressive:

To him who looks below the surface of things, the history of the United States derives its interest from the development of its society. This society is a human sea--mobile, everchanging, restless; a sea in which deep currents run, and over the surface of which sweep winds of popular emotion, a sea that has been ever adjusting itself to new shore lines, and new beds. By the side of this mighty movement the story of individual leaders, and the narrative of events sink into insignificance.¹

Turner saw society and its institutions as organic and growing.²

Historical events, within that context, are the result of a complex interplay of forces; thus, to understand any one development, the historian must examine that development in its relation to many other spheres of activity.³

Turner's advice is relevant to the discussion below because this study of "The Structure of Communication in an Emerging Frontier Community" was begun as an attempt to examine communications developments in the context of various social influences.⁴

The community in question was Jacksonville, a mining town founded in a little-known and sparsely settled part of Oregon during the early 1850's. Despite its isolated location, the town grew so rapidly that, within the first few years after its founding, it became the acknowledged center of commerce, government and population in Southern Oregon.

Jacksonville's period of greatest growth--from 1852 to 1856--occurred at a time when the town and its surrounding settlements had no local newspaper. Information of all kinds, crucial because of Jacksonville's prominence commercially and politically, arrived by other means. For the most part, in this period, citizens depended on "non-media" channels: interpersonal communication with neighbors, other residents of the Rogue River Valley, travelers, packers and other passers-through, as well as communication through business organizations, government agencies and social groups.

The emphasis on "non-media" channels was inevitable: Jacksonville was founded in an era, and in an area, in which the technology of mediated communication as yet had little impact.⁵ In the early 1850's, therefore, the information which came into Jacksonville was literally carried in by persons arriving from other areas, and was carried out in the same manner. News, which may be a commodity in all communications situations, was clearly a commodity in this one: it followed the same routes along which moved other products and supplies necessary for the community's survival.

Information flow was thus dependent on the condition of the region's roads and trails. Unfortunately, these were not always adequate either for transportation or for communication. Jacksonville's location in the rugged Rogue River Valley, an area bounded by mountains and drained by a river system which was not navigable by steamboats or other large vessels, kept it dependent for years on overland routes which were little more than pack

trails. Because these were usually passable only by expressmen, packers and other travelers on horseback or on foot, there were limitations on the amount of information which could be brought into the community. And because these routes could be blocked by snowstorms, rain or other radical changes in the weather, the reliability and frequency of message delivery was unpredictable.

Two agencies--the federal postal service and the private, local express companies--emerged as the principal distributors of routine, "packaged" news in Jacksonville during this period. Both services carried personal and commercial correspondence (the postal agency being a major channel for government communication), as well as newspapers and other periodicals, books, other printed matter, and small parcels and valuables.

By "packaged" news is meant that it was in a form--as letters, books, periodicals, and so on--which allowed it to be delivered in approximately the same condition in which it was sent. Any alteration in form or content was more likely to result from its loss or stoppage en route than from any changes introduced by interaction with express or postal riders.

As human carriers of news, of course, these men were also carriers of verbal information and gossip, and as individuals with friends and business contacts throughout the region, they fit into some of the valley's inter-personal communications networks, too. Yet their primary information function was to act as distributors, without personalizing that which they transported. Express riders, postal agents, and some military couriers brought information upon which other agencies and individuals depended for personal, commercial, political, military and educational purposes. They supplied the data consumed and processed by others, and provided, in those first years at least, the most direct inputs into the community's common information pool.

Another category of individuals and agencies acted primarily to consume and make use of this information. These were persons, groups and organizations

who introduced institutional patterns into the community by assuming the responsibility of performing various crucial social functions. They became the seats of organized action, guided in their information consumption by particular formal procedures and traditions.

Several groups and organizations fall into this category. There were the regular and volunteer military troops, meeting the needs of defense during the Indian wars of the era; there were the churches, meeting at first in private homes and later in buildings shared, in at least one case, by different denominations, obviously introducing the institution of religion to the community; and there were the schools, held informally at first, and later funded and organized within the county and state framework of education. Of most interest, perhaps, because they cut across so many areas of the community's early life, were the organizations and groups which constituted the emerging structure of government in the region.

That structure was shaped by two different traditions which had been brought by different members of the community. The traditions of the mining frontier, brought by the miners who first settled Jacksonville, furnished the area's first government. An alcalde, elected in the style of the California gold region,⁶ was the principal government official, but he was subject to the democratic vote of the miners meeting in a "miners' court."⁷ In 1853, however, this system of folk law yielded to the more formal tradition of county government, accompanied by the extension of territorial and federal law. From that point forward, the governmental forms brought by the farming frontier would predominate in Jacksonville and the other settlements of the Rogue River Valley. Decisions made by agencies within this structure, and information consumed by them, would follow procedures and patterns provided by established traditions of territorial, state and federal government.

The distributors and processors discussed above operated at a level this study has called the "institutional level" of information flow in Jacksonville. Personalization of information at this level was kept at a minimum: it was carried into the valley and consumed for purposes of action on behalf of the community, according to relatively routine and traditional procedures. Community functions served by these distributors and processors may, of course, be seen in terms of some personal consequences: the commercial correspondence carried over the mountains from California by C. C. Beekman, the local express agent, helped specific merchants in the area at the same time that it served the general function of commerce; and the personal correspondence he delivered likewise was valued by individual settlers. In the same way, the road laws, tax laws, and other decisions of the county board of supervisors ultimately affected the lives and property of particular persons. But the emerging institutional patterns of commerce and government, as well as the information distribution services carrying the data which fueled them, would have been established and maintained in the region regardless of the identity of individuals who settled there. The community as a social system and the institutional structure by which it was ordered, were formed in response to conditions and needs which made them less the servants of particular citizens or of particular settlements, than of citizens and settlements in general.

The crucial variable affecting information flow in this emerging community was therefore not so much in the medium by which it arrived, since all news came over the area's transportation arteries. Nor was it so much in the technology of communication, since information of all types was carried by individuals rather than by mechanized transmitters. It was more in the extent to which information and the networks through which it was distributed

and processed were routinized, and part of some formal institutional structure within the community.

At one extreme were those described above as operating on the "institutional level." At the other extreme were those individuals and groups on what this study has called the "interpersonal level." Here, information was usually personalized and individualized. News was primarily oral rather than written or packaged, although personal correspondence was an important exception. Such oral communication could be, and often was, altered as a natural consequence of the exchanges between its carriers, and their friends and clients.

At this level were the people's information chains, providing a means for the transmission and consumption of all types of messages and gossip among citizens of the valley. In certain circumstances, moreover, it also facilitated the growth of consensus among the area's settlers.

Some of its agents were representatives of the institutional level: the express riders, for example, and the packers who moved through the valley often on behalf of the major merchandising houses of Oregon and California. Others were simply individuals who brought news, rumor and gossip; they included travelers, immigrants, and neighbors moving, for whatever reason, from settlement to settlement.

In most instances, the interpersonal level was more for socialization and for personal business. Social occasions, particularly parties and dances, provided the most memorable events at which people gathered for entertainment, as did the few galas such as the Fourth of July Ball held in Jacksonville in 1853. More routinely, there were singing schools, quilting bees, and visits among neighbors.

The institutional and interpersonal levels of information flow, of course, were not completely separate. Some carriers and processors on the institutional level also participated in the interpersonal networks. Express riders and postal agents, as mentioned above, could be distributors of interpersonal news as well as of information relating to institutional needs; and individuals serving as members of institutional decision-making agencies brought with them to their tasks all of the information and experience they had accumulated at the interpersonal level as well. In the same way, individuals and groups ordinarily operating on the interpersonal level sometimes performed institutional functions. Particularly in Jacksonville's early years, those functions were often performed in interpersonal settings: one thinks again of school sessions and church services held in settlers' homes, and of government originally transacted in meetings of the miners' court. Even after the coming of county and territorial forms of government, and the formalizing of the structure of other institutions, the institutional level was kept responsive to the people through political party gatherings, indignation meetings, and other local citizen action assemblages.

Probably the best example of the way in which interpersonal networks could serve general social functions occurred during the Indian wars recurring intermittently during the period from 1853 to 1856.⁸ Response to the conditions of crisis came too slowly at times for the area's citizens, and thus volunteers supplemented the existing military organizations provided by the territory. Meanwhile, numerous indignation meetings and public gatherings, prodded government agencies into action. At the same time, information regarding Indian attacks, by means of which settlers organized both for counter-attack and for protection, was carried more by interpersonal

messengers--travelers, packers and others--than it was by such formal institutional agents as military couriers and postal riders. The wars made settlers more aware of their interpersonal communications links, and motivated them to make purposeful use of those links. The period of crisis was an incentive for them to organize to defend themselves; by turning to their interpersonal networks for that purpose, they made use of methods of information distribution and processing which were particularly effective at that time, and peculiarly suited to the circumstances of Indian warfare.

In this study of the distribution and consumption of information in Jacksonville during the town's "pre-newspaper era," the focus has been on what may be called "the structure of communication" there: on those agencies, individuals and organizations through which information exchange appeared to have taken place. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that the information networks in the community were formed for specific purposes, in response to a variety of different situations. Often such networks were merely for socialization, but equally often they were to serve such important community functions as commerce, government, education and religion.

It would be tempting to continue this study by focusing even more intently on the development of communication in this particular settlement, and to study that development as an interesting individual event in communication history. Turner's advice above, however, suggests that in such individual development is not the only fascination of historical research. There might be even more promise in generalizing this study to other situations; for that, however, a more carefully researched and more clearly articulated conceptual framework is required. Several areas of theory appear applicable, including general systems theory, structural functionalism, the study of social institutions, and the concept of community.

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General systems theory has already given some direction to this project, although more from the analogies it suggests than from any serious use of systems models. A notion which has appeared to be particularly relevant derives from the interdependence which is theoretically characteristic of a system. In Jacksonville, information networks served not only to facilitate cooperative action among settlers, but also to make settlers aware of their interdependence. Communication which occurred was often a self-conscious expression of the settlers' mutual need for each other, not only in military affairs, but also in governmental, commercial and social matters as well. The network of interaction through which this expression of mutual need was transmitted operated on at least the two levels depicted above, sustaining and integrating the community in the several spheres of activity crucial to its survival. Implicit in this, of course, is a second notion of importance derived from general systems theory--the idea that information distribution and processing involves a type of exchange crucial to the viability of a system.

General systems theory might be found to be even more applicable to this study, if certain of its crucial concepts could be operationalized. Boundaries of the system in Jacksonville would have to be identified, and definitions would have to be offered at the system level for such concepts as equilibrium and feedback, as well as for such crucial functions as adaptation, maintenance and integration.

Meanwhile, structural functionalism might also prove useful. Although not without its limitations,⁹ this methodology does suggest that there are certain patterns and consequences which are appropriate areas of analysis. Particularly in its description of structural and functional prerequisites

and requisites--patterns and consequences essential to the founding and to the maintenance of units in social settings--might be found analogies to some of the agencies and activities which appeared indispensable to the survival of Jacksonville in the town's early years.

Meanwhile, the evolution of a particular type of structure--the institution--is also noteworthy in Jacksonville's history. For insight into this, the literature relating to the study of social institutions may be helpful. Institutionalization has been regarded as a process of social organization, regulating the way in which societies respond to certain "needs" or "basic problems."¹⁰ In this process, institutions are characterized by the articulation of goals, the crystallization of norms of behavior, and the establishment of organizational frameworks for solving social problems. Within this conceptual context, it might be possible to analyze the growth of groups and organizations serving functions important to the community of Jacksonville. Particular attention could be paid to the standards and traditions represented by the emerging institutions of Jacksonville, to the kinds of "needs" which prompted their growth and development, and to the information networks which aided the process of institutionalization by providing channels for a particularly crucial type of commodity exchange.

Finally, an obvious area of theory applicable to this project is the concept of community. Reference to community typologies could lead to understanding of the evolution of community structure in Jacksonville. A classic typology is that suggested by Ferdinand Tönnies. Tönnies assumes that there are two types of social relationship, in which associations occur either because the parties involved attach significance to the relationship, or because they have the purpose of achieving particular goals. In Jacksonville, the growth of the community could be considered to have gone

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from what Tönnies calls a Gemeinschaft type of society (represented by the mining camp forms of organization) to a Gesellschaft type (that brought by the farming frontier). The information networks of the interpersonal and institutional levels might also be interpreted in terms of these two poles, with the interpersonal relationships approximating the Gemeinschaft type, the institutional relationships roughly corresponding to the Gesellschaft type. Meanwhile, some recent studies of community, including those grounded more in empirical investigations,¹¹ could be even more directly applicable.

A conceptual framework for the study of communication in Jacksonville, it appears, could be drawn from any one of these areas of theory, or could be adapted from ideas in all. Once that framework is articulated, the next step in research should be the undertaking of a comparative study. It might be possible to study another mining community of the 1850's or 1860's; a different type of frontier community in the same era; a markedly different type of community in the same time period; or a similar community existing at another period in history.¹²

This kind of investigation, in other words, appears to be rich with possibilities. This is not to claim that it assures either the discovery or the interpretation of all of the social forces which attend the founding and the early growth of a community such as Jacksonville, or even of an area's information networks. What it should suggest, however, is that there is a need to account for the possible influence of a variety of factors on such events, preferably within the context of a conceptual framework drawn from appropriate areas of social science theory.

This is not the only kind of project which should be undertaken in communication history. As Turner said, in the midst of his plea for consideration of the complexity of events in history, "In truth, there is no single key to American history."¹³ Nor, one may add, is there a single key to

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communication history; there are undoubtedly many. There is merit, however, in the attempt to find as many of them as possible.

FOOTNOTES

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- ¹From an article entitled "The Development of American Society," included in Wilbur R. Jacobs, ed., America's Great Frontiers and Sections: Frederick Jackson Turner's Unpublished Essays (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 170. *Italics his.*
- ²See, for example, his remarks in separate selection in Everett E. Edwards, comp., The Early Writings of Frederick Jackson Turner (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1938), pp. 57 and 73.
- ³Ibid., p. 53; and Jacobs, loc. cit.
- ⁴Jerilyn Sue McIntyre, "The Structure of Communication in an Emerging Frontier Community: Jacksonville, Oregon 1852-1856" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 1973).
- ⁵The telegraph was the notable technological innovation of the era, and it had not yet been extended to the Oregon country. See Clarence Bagley, "Transmission of Intelligence in Early Days in Oregon," Oregon Historical Quarterly, XIII (December, 1912), pp. 359-360; and E. D. Smith, Jr., "Communication Pioneering in Oregon," Oregon Historical Quarterly, XXXIX (December, 1938), pp. 355-356.
- ⁶Mining camp government is discussed in detail in Charles Howard Shinn, Mining Camps: A Study in American Frontier Government, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), pp. 45-220; and in Rodman Paul, California Gold: The Beginning of Mining in the Far West (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1947), pp. 197-239, among other sources.
- ⁷A procedure which verged on mob rule in several episodes in Jacksonville's early history. See Shinn, op. cit., pp. 181-189.
- ⁸Among the many sources describing the period of the Indian wars, a recent book is probably the best; see Stephen Dow Beckham, Requiem for a People, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971).
- ⁹Advantages and disadvantages in the application of both systems theory and structural functionalism are discussed in Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., A Behavioral Approach to Historical Analysis (New York: The Free Press, 1969), pp. 169-210.
- ¹⁰Samuel N. Eisenstadt, "Social Institutions: The Concept," International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), Vol. 14, pp. 409-421.
- ¹¹Possibilities appear to exist in studies growing out of the theories of Robert Park and other "human ecologists."

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¹²Such a project has been undertaken by Jay Swartz, a doctoral student at the University of Iowa, who is currently studying a contemporary commune in rural Missouri.

¹³Jacobs, loc. cit.